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SUBJECT: Fatigued Comorans Anxious About Ramadan

REF: ANTAN 531

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Fuel stocks are dwindling without another shipment confirmed, leading Comorans to fear Ramadan celebrations will be affected. President Sambi's popularity remains low and is not helped by his frequent absences. In this context, the GOC will convene a planning meeting August 28-29 for the eventual inter-island constitutional conference. END SUMMARY.

Resident Diplomats Concerned

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¶2. (SBU) The return to "normal" following the recent fuel delivery to the Comoros will be short-lived (REFTEL). Operators in Moroni expect fuel stocks to run out before the end of August; no new fuel shipment is currently expected. According to French Ambassador Hallande, the Kuwaiti investment group operating in the Comoros have made USD three million available as of August 25 (it is unclear if this is loan, grant, or advance on royalties). While this financing may allow another stop-gap fuel shipment, the actual supply delivery could take weeks. Ambassador Hallande noted that representatives from all three island governments had approached him about new supply contracts with TOTAL; he said he replied that only the Union government could restore the fuel agreement.

¶3. (SBU) UNDP ResRep Opia Kumah said he remains in humanitarian crisis response mode, concerned that fuel shortages, rising food prices, and potential social unrest could combine for a severe impact in the coming months. African Union Resident Representative Mouran Taiti, focused on longstanding political questions, does not think better governance to improve social conditions will be possible before the inter-island constitutional conference delineates the roles and responsibilities of institutions.

Comorans Near Their Breaking Point?

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¶4. (SBU) Long lines at service stations, electricity rationed to four hours per day, and related inconveniences have been readily born by the resilient Comoran population. Limited fuel can be tolerated, but as we saw last month, the end of supplies brings public outrage. Civil servants and teachers have not been paid for months. President Sambi has never before been less popular. Many Comoran contacts are preoccupied by the coming of Ramadan at the beginning of September; a period when they traditionally gather as families and communities in the evenings to break the day-long fast. With the prospect of having neither fuel for transportation or electricity, these traditions will be hard to maintain. There is typically an increase in food prices during Ramadan, which will exacerbate already elevated prices. There is no indication the Union Government has the resources to make salary payments before Ramadan; a period when Comorans often spend three-months salary on their religious observances.

Preparing For Inter-Island Talks

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¶5. (SBU) In the midst of recurring energy crises, the Union will hold preparatory meetings August 28-29 to attempt to determine the timing, attendance, and agenda of the long-awaited "inter-island

dialogue" to address constitutional, federal, and institutional problems. The emboldened island presidents, in light of President Sambi's "incompetence" handling the country's fuel supply, are expected to stand firm on island autonomy. Ambassador Mourad reported that no less than 20 "political parties" have registered with his office, "they represent no one, but they hope get a seat at the table to share in the spoils."

¶6. (SBU) AU Special Envoy Francisco Madeira, who has pressured the Comorans to take this step since the June Anjouan president election, will be in Moroni to attend the preparatory meetings. According to Ambassador Mourad, the AU believes President Sambi must accomplish some kind of clarification and reform of Comoran federalism during his presidency; even if changes are officially enacted by his successor in 2010.

Comment:

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¶7. (SBU) Several prominent political and civic leaders have already called on Sambi to resign. His campaign promises on housing, education, and health have been largely unrealized - with the exception of several Iranian-funded Koranic schools. Sambi's greatest accomplishment, deposing Bacar and restoring order in Anjouan, was closely followed by the ill-advised cancellation of the TOTAL fuel supply contract before any viable replacement was in place. (He did this immediately after his May visit to Teheran, where he apparently saw the Iranian offer of unrefined crude - which the GOC was somehow to have refined in Aden -- as too good to pass up.) Disenchanted Comorans now hold scant hope that Sambi will accomplish much in his 19 months left in office; some are openly suspicious that he will try to move the country toward Muslim

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fundamentalism or Shi'ism. In 2010, they may not expect much better, with the notable exception of 40,000 Mohelians excited for their island's turn to run the country.

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